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Work outcome in young adults with disabilities

Holwerda, Anja

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SUMMARY



In the past decade the number of young people with disabilities has increased considerably. These young adults experience physical, mental and/or developmental disabilities and many experience limitations in their personal functioning resulting in limited participation in society. In general, young adults with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than their non-disabled peers. This limited work participation of the individual can be influenced by disease or disorder, but also by personal factors (e.g. age, gender, self-esteem and motivation) and by environmental factors (e.g. the social context). Knowledge regarding opportunities for young adults with disabilities to participate in work and factors that influence the realization of these opportunities in practice is hardly available (**Chapter 1**). Therefore, the objective of this thesis is to gain insight into the personal and social environmental factors predicting work participation, finding as well as maintaining employment, among young adults with disabilities applying for a disability benefit. This overall aim has been translated into two main research questions:

1. Which personal and social environmental factors predict work participation of young adults with disabilities applying for a disability benefit?
2. Do personal and social environmental predictors differ for disease-specific subgroups?

Chapter 2 describes the design and methods of the “Young Disabled at Work” cohort-study, a longitudinal prospective study following young adults applying for a disability benefit for a two-year follow-up period. Data were collected through questionnaires. To get a realistic picture of the young adult with disability, we asked themselves, their parent(s), and their school teacher and insurance physician to fill out a questionnaire to provide information. The questionnaire consisted of items regarding demographics, disease-related, personal and social environmental factors in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). Our outcome measure was defined as finding and maintaining employment in which only paid work for any number of hours was included.

In **chapter 3** a study is presented examining the factors associated with work-ability level as assessed by the insurance physician of the social security institute among young adults with disabilities applying for disability benefits. Of the participants, 57.2% were male and 42.8% female, with a mean age of 19.6 years (SD 2.6). Of them 42.5% had a primary diagnosis of intellectual disability, 28.2% had a developmental disorder, 16.9% had another psychiatric disorder, and 12.4% had somatic diseases. More than half of the individuals had one or more co-morbid condition(s). According to the insurance physician (IP), 84.2 percent (n=1478) had abilities to work. In this study we found that primary diagnosis, comorbidity and subclinical mental complaints were associated with IP-assessed work ability. Persons with mental health conditions as primary diagnosis were less likely to reach a higher work ability

than persons with somatic diseases. Young adults with two or more comorbid conditions and those with psychiatric or developmental comorbidity were less likely to reach a higher work ability level than persons without comorbidity. Young adults with subclinical mental complaints were half as likely to reach a higher IP-assessed work ability than young adults without this condition.

In **chapter 4** the expectations in the transition from school to work of young adults with mental disabilities from special needs education, their parents and their school teachers regarding future ability to work in competitive employment are described. Furthermore the ability of these young adults, their parents and their school supervisors to predict future work status has been addressed and the most predictive perspective of work outcome after leaving school was identified.

More than half of the young adults and parents and 37% of the teachers expected the young adult to be able to work in competitive employment, compared to 39% that actually entered competitive employment in the 18 months following claim assessment. Young adults with mental disabilities, their parents and their school teachers were moderately able to predict future work when expecting the young adult to be able to work in competitive employment. The expectation of the school teacher was the only perspective that significantly predicted entering competitive employment, with a small complementary effect of the prediction of parents and a very small additional effect of the expectation of the young adult. We concluded that expectations of school teachers and parents are valuable in predicting employment outcome. Co-operation of school teachers and parents in setting realistic expectations for the young adult is therefore necessary to ensure the best possible employment outcomes for them.

In **chapter 5** a systematic review of the literature is presented regarding facilitating or hindering predictors for work participation in individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Seventeen factors, categorized as disease-related factors, personal factors or external factors, were found to be related to work outcome. Limited cognitive ability was the only significant predictor consistently found. Functional independence and institutionalization were both reported by one study to be significantly related to work outcome. Inconsistent findings or non-significant findings were reported for the other fourteen factors. This review points to an important gap in the literature regarding predictors of work outcomes in individuals with ASD. There is a need for more high quality cohort studies focussing on work participation as the main outcome among people with autism spectrum disorders. Moreover, the findings of this review emphasize the need for adequate intervention and services, geared to the needs of the individual with ASD, that help them to adjust to the psychosocial demands in society.

Chapter 6 presents the factors predicting work participation, finding work as well as maintaining employment, of young adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and attention deficit disorders (ADD).

Both personal and social factors were found to be important in predicting work outcome, and predictors for finding work differed substantially from predictors for maintaining employment. Living situation and motivation appeared to be only influential for individuals with ASD, while gender only influenced work outcome for individuals with ADD. Besides socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, living situation) we found that expectations regarding future work level by the DD-individuals themselves is an important predictor for finding work. Therefore, it is important for professionals to take the expectations of individuals with DD into account when supporting these individuals to find work. As the social context of individuals with DD seem to play a major role in finding and maintaining work, they need to be taken into account as well by professionals working with individuals with DD in their transition to find work.

In **chapter 7** the predictors of work participation of young adults with mild intellectual disabilities (ID) are described. Personal and, to a lesser degree, social factors were found to be valuable in predicting work participation. Motivation, expectations regarding future work level, living situation and gender all predicted work participation for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities. Results showed no substantial differences between predictors for finding and maintaining employment. Especially personal factors are influential in predicting work outcome and may be suitable factors to include in interventions. As expectations are an important predictor for both work outcomes, realistic expectations are imperative for being successful in finding as well as maintaining employment. Therefore, it is important for parents, school teachers and transition counselors to help young adults with ID to develop these realistic expectations for future employment.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the main findings of this thesis as well as a discussion regarding its strengths, limitations and also its implications for policies and practices and directions for further research. Inclusion of young adults with disabilities in employment is desirable, from a personal as well as from a societal perspective. For a society to be inclusive, the focus should be on abilities rather than on disabilities. This does not mean that young adults with disabilities should bear the sole responsibility for their participation. Society as a whole has a responsibility to enable and facilitate individuals to find and maintain employment. Young adults with disabilities can only work in competitive employment when employers, companies and organizations are willing to employ and support them. Moreover, because of their vulnerable labour market position, adequate support from formal sources, like school supervisors, transition counsellors and employers, as well as informal sources, like parents, friends and neighbours, is needed.

